

Pulled to the Surface and Other Essays

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Creative nonfiction is a genre of creating writing which uses creative styles to engage factual narrative. The genre allows writers to sort through ideas in a compelling way and can include autobiography, memoir, personal essays, etc. This project is a series of essays which discuss topics that are personal to me such as race, gender, religion, and popular culture. Each of these topics act as lenses through which I understand narratives I've patterned into my identity.

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I would not have found this genre of writing without the help of my Integrated Studies advisor Kevin Harrelson. I would like to thank him for connecting me with Jill and for guiding me through my major.

Thank you to my mom who is at the center of each essay. These essays would lack beauty without her. Thank you as well to my dad for encouraging me, and my sister for being my biggest supporter.

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Process Analysis

I titled my Integrated Studies major Existential Narrative Psychology hoping that if I learned about the ways existence, meaning, and narrative align, I would be able to make sense of my experiences. I hoped if I hung my life on a particular narrative, or selected distinct values to live out, my life would become more meaningful. What I found instead is possibility. My life, and every life, is a series of possibilities. Studying Existential Narrative Psychology has increased the number of possibilities that I am aware of in my life. I can't be anyone I want, nor can I adopt certain identities, but I can now see the endless routes the current identities I hold can develop; I become endless possibilities.

I had originally intended to focus this series of essays on my college experience solely. I was hoping to write about different experiences I've had, and how they relate to what I've learned. Instead each essay has been a combination of where I've been and where I am going. Since so much of my life is rooted in where I've come from, it made sense that I would need to write about my experiences with my parents and my family. I don't think I've ever written an essay where I haven't talked about my family—their presence in my life is a crucial part of my identity, and because my parents have different races, I often write about how the tension of having parents of different and often competing races emerges in my identity. My writing is a way of attempting to understand what it means to be both Black and white in America.

Reading works like *Between the World and Me* and “My President was Black” by Ta-Nehisi Coates and “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin has been influential in my attempts at understanding my experiences with race. Coates' language is incredibly poetic, and I wanted to mirror his style of writing. Similarly, the musical artists Solange and Beyoncé, have

also been influential in my understanding of being a Black woman. To understand my identity without situating it in my gender, and my race, would be amiss. I experience the world through the intersection of being both a Black and white woman. These identities are important to me because my life has been constructed around them, both as a result of my own choices, and because of the way others experience knowing me. I am constructed somewhere in the midst of these different identities before I am constructed in any other way.

Though each of these identities is crucial, I believe none of them would hold meaning for me without discussing my belief in God and the ways I understand Christian faith. I thought about each facet of my identity before becoming a Christian, but becoming a Christian opened up to me more possibilities and allowed me to understand the origins of each identity as well as the complexity. Each piece is so integral to my life that it wouldn't make sense for me to write an essay which didn't discuss each in some small way. For that reason, these identities, and the ways they intersect, have emerged in these essays as the lenses through which I see the world.

The content of these essays wouldn't have mattered without the craft elements used to center and organize it. Phillip Lopate has a chapter in his book *To Show and to Tell* where he discusses the difficulty of turning oneself into a character. This is one of the primary goals of creative nonfiction, but it is also one of the things I struggle with most as a writer. I find speech oddly restraining and this can leak into my writing as I attempt to pin myself down on the page. I worry about how I will come across, if what I'm writing is what I really mean, and if the writing is nuanced enough to represent me. A huge challenge for me was not removing myself from my writing. What I mean by this is that often when I am writing, the version of myself I am presenting on the page will seem removed or separated from the reader. This is a defense mechanism on my part which allows me to say what I want in an intellectualized way without

actually being vulnerable by sharing the emotion or experience which is attached to the idea.

I don't want the character I am creating to appear overly emotional, and I often want to remove that character from experiencing criticism. What I am actually doing is removing myself from being in a vulnerable position where my readers have the ability to make a judgment about me which I didn't intend. Linda Martin Alcoff's essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others," presents an epistemological argument for when it is and is not appropriate to speak on behalf of others. She writes:

"the pursuit of an absolute means to avoid making errors...From such a position one's own location and positionality would not require constant interrogation and critical reflection; one would not have to constantly engage in this emotionally troublesome endeavor...Such a desire for mastery and immunity must be resisted."¹

Her words have been incredibly influential for me as they helped me realize that often I try to master understanding of my own experiences before sharing them with others. My fear has been that if I write about my own experiences of being a Black woman, other Black women will criticize me. It isn't fair for me to shield myself from this criticism and it certainly isn't how art is created.

My challenge in this series of essays was to remove some of these defense mechanisms and allow the reader's perception to be out of my control. I felt that I was able to do this in a couple of moments throughout each essay, but I believe that this is still an area where my writing needs to grow. One of the wonderful things about being a writer is that my work evolves and grows with me, as a result I have no worries that my writing will become more vulnerable as I

¹ Linda Martin Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others." alcoff.com. Accessed April 3, 2017. <http://www.alcoff.com/content/speaothers.html>.

become more trusting and open.

Another craft element that was important to me as I was writing and revising these essays was the coherence and consistency of each essay. I wanted to focus on opening each essay with an element of the different threads which would be pulled through the essay. Ana Maria Spagna and Steve Harvey have an essay titled, “The Essay in Parts,” which helped me to understand how I would go about giving form to my writing. Their essay discusses many different parts of what a good essay should contain, but what was important to me was ensuring the essay had a center. My hope was that each essay would have a centrifugal moment where the ideas were headed, and where the essay would start to fall before closing. Finally, I wanted to ensure that each thread was pulled entirely through the essay aiding the overall coherence and consistency.

Completing this collection of essays has given me a fuller understanding of my voice by helping me understand my thought processes. Before writing these essays, I had a hard time connecting concepts that I was thinking about with my real life experience. I knew that the two were intertwined, but I had trouble articulating how or why. This collection helped me to become aware of the ways I process concepts, ideas, experiences and emotions through lyrics (whether that be music or poetry/ prose), social media (such as Twitter and Instagram), and my religion. Aligning these things through a type of collaging in my essays helped me to see how impossible it is for me to explain concepts and talk about my experiences without discussing the different sources of those concepts, ideas, experiences and emotions. I am starting to understand that my voice, or the person I am constructing on the page, is very intellectual, but it is an intellectualism which is grounded in the relation of ideas from different sources, finding commonality in emotion. One of the most powerful ways I demonstrate this is in “Spinning Gold and Conjuring Beauty,” where I arrive at emotions and ideas—the center of the essay—by tracing the different

sources which present themselves throughout the writing. I enjoy writing through the lens of these sources because they help me make sense of the narratives I've patterned into my identity.

Overall, I am thankful for the opportunity to reflect on the ways I have grown as a person, and the ability to write these reflections through creative nonfiction. I'm glad that I chose to complete this particular creative project for my thesis because it has allowed me to understand the ways I'm carving out possibility in my life, and the ways I'm understanding how I'm creating myself. I think it represents who I am, as a nuanced person, in this present moment as I prepare to graduate from college. I'm looking forward to being able to read this collection after I'm removed from it a bit. It is a piece of this particular point in my life, and for that I am grateful.

Pulled to the Surface

On my upper right arm, just below my shoulder, I have tattooed on my skin a portrait of a woman sitting in a row boat, rowing away from a rocky shore towards a horizon of sails. She was the product of a second session in the creation of a partial sleeve. With her came a plover, tucked just under my elbow, goldenrod, blooming into the crease of my arm, and sand, extending from the plover into the beach from which she was departing. The first session brought lilac and a yew-tree branch wrapped around my first tattoo on the inside of my forearm, as well as a quail sitting at the forefront of my forearm. The partial sleeve extends from my upper right forearm through to a horizon of sails sitting inches below my shoulder. Each image is as intricate as the last, but each has meant something new as I've explored their origins, the ways they appear on my body, and the ways my future ripples out from the permanence of my decisions.

I saw each piece only minutes before getting them etched into my skin. I'd sent a poem to the artist and given him freedom in pulling pieces from a portion of the poem. I looked at the images he'd drawn up and wondered if one day the people closest to me would be able to journey to the places I needed to be to get the tattoo. I wondered if they'd be able to understand why I'd chosen to get something so permanent with the knowledge that who I am is permeable though my tattoos aren't. Will my future children be able to see me as I am now in my tattoos, or will they only see a reflection of me in the ways I've aged? Will they understand the beauty I've attached to each image as a result of my experiences with them?

From the moment I lay on the artists' black and wooden chair, I wondered about the woman in the portrait. What was it that brought her to the shoreline? Perhaps she'd come to the shoreline for a sense of solitude to travel into the questions she was asking herself. I stood on the

beach looking out at her rowing away from me and wondered what had brought her there. I wondered too about the waters she was rowing on. I hadn't yet seen how the tattoo would rise to the surface of my body, but I knew the waters she found herself on were familiar to me. In my own way, I'd paddled out from the same shoreline.

I paddled out for the first time at seventeen. There I found a book of T.S. Eliot's poems in a used bookstore. Buried deep in the middle of the book was a poem called "Ash Wednesday." I stood there reading over and over again the last portion:

*The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings
And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.*

*Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.*

The poem details Eliot's conversion experience in extravagant metaphors. There is a tension present on the page of Eliot's desire to command his own life, the futility he finds, and his desire to swim deeper into waters where he experiences God. This tension in many ways rippled into me, and I clung to it. My parents ended their marriage only months before I found it necessary to paddle out. I went into the waters hoping to pull something to the surface which would give me a reason why we live the ways we do, why we love, and how we journey through life alone. What I found were much deeper waters than I had ever expected.

Each stroke became a question. Do people learn to love one another? Do they forget? Can the depths of my heart hold anything real? What does it mean to experience something real? I thought I was going to a place where the waters were deep enough to find exactly what it was that had been so devastating for me the day my parents told me they were ending their marriage. I paddled out looking for a hope which would say, "You're okay...You're okay...You're okay." I never felt like their separation was my fault, but it took paddling into the waves of the open sea to find depths which I'd hidden from myself. In those depths I'd hidden away a need to make everything okay, and with it, the feeling that I'd messed up the only thing I was commanding: the ability to piece together the broken parts of the people closest to me. I paddled harder for years, telling myself again, and again, "You can make everything okay. You don't have to be okay to make everything okay."

What I didn't realize until almost four years after clinging to the poem, was that the sea, the depths, and the waves it produced were not my enemies, and though the poem had been resonating in my life for years, I understood it differently. I believe that God used the sea to draw me out beyond the shoreline, to force me into the waves, to have a close friend in conflict draw out of me, "I'm not okay. I couldn't make everything okay," and she responded with, "It's

okay...You're okay...You're okay."

I gave the tattoo artist freedom in deciding what images from the poem would be etched into my skin because I have a strong feeling that whatever is pulled to the surface will be something that is ready to appear. I have a sort of intuition that each image presented itself as something which had been healing in my life. It sounds perhaps superstitious and nonsensical, but I believe it to some degree. He starts every session with, "So I was thinking..." and I respond with, "Yeah, let's do it."

My heart rate was slow, the air calm, and I was contemplative as I lay on the cool surface of the chair. The visual representation of the poem became places to journey to. The words were just words printed on page recurring in my mind, but the image made the words real and carried me to places that seemed familiar. I knew the waters which were etched into my skin, had felt the wind from the horizon and the sand of the beach; I had traveled to these waters before and knew that they had risen from within me. I knew this because of the woman traveling alone in the image on my upper arm. Why would she paddle out alone unless she were looking for something? I've never had the literal experience of paddling away from a shore on strong, unending, merciless waters, but I've found myself in them in a metaphorical sense.

I decided to get my first tattoo a month before leaving to go spend what promised to be a

life-changing summer in Colorado. I figured there was no better time to get a tattoo. I left Indiana and Ohio for Colorado to spend eleven weeks working and participating in a program with my church at the YMCA of the Rockies. I'd never done anything like it, so I didn't know what to expect, but I was sure it would be life changing. I wasn't sure what the tattoo would be or where I wanted it, but I was sure I wouldn't leave Colorado without something permanent just under the surface of my skin to solidify the experience.

I was nineteen, and I knew I didn't need my mom's permission to get a tattoo, but I called her anyway. I've never made an important decision without the guidance of my mom, because I trust that she'll give me the guidance I'm looking for, though I sometimes worry that I'm only seeking her approval. More than her approval, I trust that she knows herself well enough to know what she would do if she were in my situation, and I trust that she knows me well enough to guide me when our choices deviate from one another. My mom and I are very different people, but her guidance is important to me.

I'd decided on the verse 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10, tattooed on the inside of my right forearm. I sat in the permanency of my decision. I wondered if getting a verse tattoo as a Christian was too cliché. I kept wondering if I'd be happy with my decision when I was sixty-four, and the tattoo was wrinkled and faded. I wondered if my future children would grow up around my tattoos and wonder about them in the same ways I'd wondered about my mom's tattoos. I wondered what they were at times, and I wondered why she'd decided to get them. What kind of experience had she had that she chose to allow something to sit permanently in her skin?

Just a few days after I got my first tattoo my mom added two more to her right and left arms. They were for my sister and me. Each tattoo, including these, tells the story of love in her

life. I am sure that her tattoos rose to the surface of her body, not just because we are her daughters, but because she has had her own struggle in loving us. She has told me about each tattoo numerous times, but I often forget. They symbolize the ways her heart has broken in her lifetime, the ways she's been restored, and the immense love she has for my sister and me. The two added in Colorado serve as reminders to me that my mom continues to grow as a person. She has paddled into deep waters in moments where being our mother required more of her than she thought she could offer, and she has returned knowing that she is much stronger, and much braver than she would have believed.

The woman my mom was before she had me or my sister is fascinating to me. I admired the ways she was able to make decisions to rule over her own body and decide what parts of herself she would pull up and permanently etch into the surface of her skin. She's allowed me glimpses of the things that lie beneath, anchoring what covers the surface of her. But I am better able to see these waters in the ways she lights up around her family; revealing the love and admiration she has for the people who shaped the experiences necessary for the tattoos to be pulled to the surface. When she speaks to my grandmother, I see her admiration for the woman who loved her well, but was not able to protect her from the hardness which is necessary to live with an abusive father, a strong mother, and six siblings below the poverty line. Her tattoos are evidence of this, and they show me that she'd taken extreme care in deciding what parts of herself to hold on to. I wonder if my children will feel the same way about me, if they'll admire my tattoos and consider the person I was—the person I currently am—before having them.

When I called my mom a few days before getting my first tattoo I thought I was calling to ask her if she regretted her tattoos, or if she worried about the ways they were aging on her body. I realize now that I was calling to ask her about the ways we carry things with us as we age. What

I was really asking was, “Am I okay? Will I heal from your separation? Will my family turn out the same way?”

I wanted to know if the tattoos which had been pulled to the surface of her body were necessary, if they healed what was lying underneath the surface, if they allowed her to paddle back to the shore before departing once again into deeper waters. My worry stems from a fear that the decisions I make will ripple out and become something I haven’t anticipated as I grow older. I was trying to convince myself that if I mastered each paddle stroke, and tamed the waters, I wouldn’t hurt like my mom did.

In the conversation, she explained to me that she’s never regretted her tattoos. She said they were deeply meaningful to her and had continued to be even as she transitioned out of the phase of life she got them in. She wasn’t worried at all about the ways they’d aged on her body. The ink blossoming to her skin became a way of pulling to the surface what had been dwelling inside of her, but there was nothing of healing in her explanation.

As I’ve increased the amount of permanent things on my body, I have come to a place of understanding that each tattoo journeys with me as I wear it on my skin. Each image isn’t pulled to the surface as a badge of mastery and healing, but rather as a confidence in the belief that waters can be deep, and waves can be unwavering, but I’m okay nonetheless. Each image evolves with me as I transition from phase to phase and travels with me as I swim between shorelines into deeper waters. In many ways I travel like the woman in my tattoo: alone and into deep waters. I do so sometimes in tremendous fear, unsure of where I’m headed, paddling

nonetheless.

I understand now that heavy things act as anchors, and that we have to paddle into the waters where they lie to pull them up, deciding which anchors stay and which to remove. My mom decided what heavy things to pull to the surface of her skin, but she didn't share them with me. She didn't share with me how she'd begun to understand the sea, and I suspect that maybe she wanted to protect me from the harshness of the waves.

Someday, I might carry around my own seven-year-old, and they will press their fingers into my body the same way I had my mom's. They will ask how the tattoos had been pulled to the surface, which is to say they will ask about the waters I had paddled on to find each tattoo. I will have to take them with me to these waters and the depth of each one will be measured by how much healing has occurred. I have a sense that the waters will remain deep, as that has proven to be the case with my mom, but I want to be brave enough to take my seven-year-old with me; to show them they have nothing to fear in paddling out to deep waters. The tattoos aren't pulled to the surface as a way of avoiding deep waters; they are a way of reminding me that deep waters are necessary.

Where That Leaves Me

I find myself gasping for air between the sprints of my life while lying on the cool, blanketed comfort of my bed, absorbing the vivacity and immaculateness of Instagram photographs posted by women not much older than me. My body contorts in awkward positions—lying on the curvature of my back as only my upper torso rests on a jumble of blankets, my legs hanging off the bed. I curl up in the corner, trying to bring my body into itself as much as can be humanly achieved, attempting to be absorbed by the corner wall of my bedroom, protected only by a pillow covered in a salmon color with white polka dots. The blankets, though in a jumble, the sheets, though somewhat childish, are a way of pulling myself into the adulthood of the women I follow on Instagram. Their lives detailed and expressed in the minutiae of what pattern their sheets hold, each an expression of the individuals they're creating. I look at the jumble of sheets and blankets and understand that they are a reflection of the minute decisions I've made. I will pick out new blankets and sheets at another point in my life, and they will reflect that version of the individual I am creating. I picked out the sheets currently wrapped around my bed because I thought they might be the most likely to evolve with me as I changed style.

I've never met these women, but I seem to understand the ways minutiae is both created by and create their being—not so much as real entities, as real they are, but rather as color on blank page. The beauty of the way they piece colors together on the page is what captures me. They aren't yet old enough to believe the page doesn't matter, nor are they still young enough to think that any color is suitable in any place. I lie on my bed, disappearing among the jumble of blankets both into and out of my life, captivated by 4.7 inches of a screen displaying the lives of

women, only ever women, whom I will probably never meet. I don't need to meet them, because what draws me in is not their lives, but rather their creation. I recognize that they aren't much different from me, and in some of them, I see my mother. I see the ways they make themselves, and I want to follow their lead. The captivating trance sometimes resets my breath, steadies my heart, and throws me onto the next sprint.

I breathe deeply, gravitating to the same Instagram account over and over again. The account is run by a woman whose appearance is entirely enough to tell me both everything and nothing that I've wanted to know about her life. Maybe contained in her account is another life that I've patched and parceled into her life—maybe mine, or my mother's. Her skin radiates depth and richness, glowing only the way dark Black skin does, set off by a wide, gapped smile, just under a fashionable nose ring. Her hair, an almost auburn blonde color, crowns her as only natural Black hair can. Before I find my way back to a post detailing her experience, I know she has more than likely had a natural hair journey.

These journeys have been common among Black women for the last few years as more and more Black women are empowered to give up the products and tools which are used to fade what is given to them: their blackness. Solange has a song on her newest album *A Seat at the Table*, where she speaks of the emotional labor that is involved in these natural hair journeys. Contained in the group knowledge of Black women is the ability to understand the journey a woman must take in order to love her hair as it grows out of her scalp. If she does not, she may be tempted to use it as a weapon against herself; trying to bleach her identity out of her hair to

make it appear thinner and less coarse. When she draws this weapon she diminishes herself. It makes her believe that she cannot be beautiful as she is.

I admire this woman's the natural hair journey before I can even pinpoint the exact moment that she began it. And I am reminded of the ways my mother spoke about hair growing up. She said that when she was a girl, her cousin gave her a relaxer. I imagine she was excited to finally be considered beautiful through the removal of the coarseness and kinks of her hair. She must have seen the white women on television and in magazines with their long, straight, fine hair, and she must have been made to believe that only this could be beautiful. I identify with her excitement, but I feel saddened that at any time in my mother's life she didn't feel beautiful because of the hair or skin she was born with. I am angry that such an arbitrary thing keeps such small Black girls from experiencing their own beauty. I am reminded of this when my mother or another Black woman compliments me for my "good hair."

This woman's hair tells me that her daughter might have fewer problems accepting her own hair. She will not attempt to reduce the kinks and coarseness, and might not be excited to have "good white hair." This is not to say that blackness is diminished without a hair journey, no, but rather to say there is some sort of reclaiming of blackness as a whole and beautiful identity in a natural hair journey. And she—she has arrived most beautifully, with a fro resembling a crown that reaches out to her followers, those with dark skin, beckoning them to a type of reclamation and liberation. She appears soft, powerful, and free, these things are what lure me to her account. I wish my mother had been beckoned in the same way. Not for my sake, so that I could find joy in my hair at a younger age, but so that she could find joy in her own beauty apart from me.

Most photographs are dedicated to her style. Her account is primarily meant to be a type of fashion blog. The clothes themselves are beautiful and enough to bring back anyone who has an interest in self-presentation through fashion, but that's not what captivates me. The posts which aren't dedicated to fashion are a neapolitan of motherhood, her children and husband, the magic that is living and working in New York City, and femininity coupled with the politics of being female.

The singularity of each of these things isn't what captivates me either. I wish I could say which of these intersections of her identities and interests in particular brings me back over and over again, but I'm sure that the simple, one answer won't suffice. Somewhere linked between the different facets of the photographs she's posted is a picture of her, as the woman running the account, which keeps me intrigued enough to keep coming back, to keep scrolling further and further into the account of a seeming stranger. Each photograph serves as a piece of a puzzle and when put together, the viewer gets a full picture of who she might be. But maybe, seeing past the pieced together picture, I, as the viewer, graft my own story into hers and it tells me more about her.

There is one post of just her shoes, a pair of clogs specifically sent to her by a company so that she would promote them on her page. The promotion worked, and I recently bought a pair. When I punched the digits of my credit card into the space provided, I thought "this is the most adult thing I've ever purchased." When they arrived in the mail, I saw them on the porch, and began to understand myself in a more adult way. I pulled them out of the box, slipping off the moccasins my mom bought me for my 22nd birthday. I wrapped them around my feet, and I learned to walk around in them and in a similar way, I learned to walk around in my adulthood.

When I wear them now, they feel comfortable, almost natural on my feet. They feel like they make a statement which says, "It's safe for you to look at me, I can draw attention, and feel beautiful." Sometime in the future I'll go to my job's Christmas party and I'll put them on as if it's natural, with no worries if I'm drawing too much attention to myself. I'll be comfortable in the vulnerability of constructing my appearance and my personhood in a way which allows others to see me. In this way, I'm hoping to become an adult like the woman in the photographs; one who allows her own beauty to be exposed without fear that she will be called vain or fraudulent.

There is a photograph, which appeared in October of last year, taken with almost perfect symmetry, where she blossoms in the picture wearing a jean jacket, cut off jeans, and light brown boots (the only way I can describe it, knowing it is fashionable without the proper expertise to know how or why). Her daughter appears alongside her in the photograph, wrapped and tucked under her left arm as they both gaze at a 4.7-inch screen; hardly anything separates her from me as I shift the way I'm lying in my bed. She pays no mind to the camera; she contently holds her daughter, who is captivated by the phone, and her daughter is more than willing to remain captivated as evidenced by the small-missing-teeth-smile spread from ear to ear. Her daughter has a much lighter skin complexion than she does—I assume she is entirely Black, while her daughter I know to be what is conceived of as half Black. This term does not sound derogatory or gross coming out of the mouth, but more so paradoxical; how can such a small girl hold several different, at times, competing identities in her small body? But these two

different skin tones don't separate them, because both her hair, and her daughters, bloom out of their heads, twisting in different directions, reaching for the light and falling as if each strand has made a pact with gravity and has come to the understanding that not even a single strand will entirely be held down.

I stare at the photograph, slowly sinking beneath the jumble of blankets, and realize that it is not the woman or her daughter personally which draw me to it, but rather the story that I am only able to write over a person I've never met. I look at the photograph and realize that somewhere in it I see my mother's story, as the woman protectively wraps her arm around her daughter. There is a fullness here, which makes her daughter's father and her husband irrelevant, or rather unnecessary in the photograph. She seems at once fully herself and fully her daughter's mother. There is neither a parsing of identity or a fullness of one identity above the other, but both existing in tandem alongside one another. Neither is diminished in the other and it is the fullness of each separately that both are able to be full among one another. I wonder if she knows this about herself as she looks at the photograph. Does she see her fullness, or just radiate it?

I've seen the same fullness in pictures of my mother, holding my sister, or me, or both of us. In one picture, my mother is holding my sister and me on vacation somewhere, maybe in New Mexico or Colorado. She's wearing high waist jeans with a white blouse tucked in by a black belt. She also wears a black cap over her hair, cut short to fit the requirements of her military uniform. She holds me on her right side. I look younger than two, and I am wearing a striped jumpsuit, with tennis shoes. My hair is tied in knots around my head. My sister, held on my mom's left side, must be younger than four. She wears her hair in a loose fro, with 90s light washed jeans, and a collared jacket. My mom's face is completely absorbed in mine as I look at my sister. My sister is the only one looking at the camera, and her smile is so big that you might

think the photograph was made for her; I love her for this smile, and the never-ending joy she radiates. In the photograph I see my mother's fullness; it shines from her and makes the photograph beautiful. I see her for herself, and see her as my mother, and see the ways her identity is encompassed and full in both. She was her own before she was my mother, but I imagine she grew into herself more the day a doctor pulled me from her stomach. I imagine my dad took the picture, but I am also aware that I don't care, because my mom is the subject of the photograph.

I wonder what supported and sustained this fullness in my mother, and what dimmed it over time, so that at the time of my adolescence, I had been made to believe that both her identity as her, wholly independent of me, and made complete in being my mother was anything but full. But I see from old photographs that she used to ooze both and her love for both was visible in the way she smiled, her eyes glowing, half circumvented by her high cheek bones covered in skin a similar tone as the woman from the Instagram account.

I know that part of this diminishment is the result of being the only Black woman in the room for far too long. I know that it is partly diminished through her participation in a relationship which had the potential, and at times the force and follow through, of invalidating her experience on two different fronts—those of being Black and being a woman. What I mean by this is that I'm sure that, although he is a wonderful person, my dad, a white man, surely had trouble at times understanding and validating the experiences and emotions of my mother, a Black woman. A marriage of this kind has to diminish that glow. I'm sure it is further diminished in the raising of children who, despite how small they are, must live out the paradox of their at times competing identities. I know that this radiance and fullness which my mother possessed, and still at times sparks and fights for, was diminished through all of these factors, but none

more so than fighting alone for a majority of her life.

Once, a few years after my parent's separation, my mother told me that, for a while, she couldn't really trust me. I remember being shocked by the abrupt, stifling harshness of her words. I knew we'd had difficulty in our relationship after she and my dad had separated, but she'd never told me that she had trouble trusting me. The ugliness of the comment was an indication to me that she believed I wasn't on her side. And since that moment, I've realized that I wasn't always.

I've realized recently that my mother's defense of herself after my parents' separation was an attempt to try to reduce her shame. It indicated to me that she had fought alone for too long. She was used to it, used to always needing to defend herself, to make herself more, because other people wouldn't fight for her. She expressed this to me as she mentioned not being hired for jobs she was overqualified for because she is Black. I knew she fought alone in this because my dad expressed believing that it wasn't fully because of her skin. His skin became a barrier in their relationship and she fought alone not only against the world, but in her closest relationships, trying to persuade us that she wasn't crazy, and she wanted rest, to have someone else fight for her. Perhaps my parent's marriage ended because she got tired of fighting against my dad. Recently she told me my dad has always wanted to pass as culturally Black without understanding what it means to be Black. This was not a case she made to sway me to her side; it is a piece of fact which brings me into solidarity with her. It is her way of saying that she understands and has lived my experience. I realize that she has endured much more than I have or will and I admire her for this reason. My thoughts return to the woman in the picture, and her daughter, and I wonder if there's will be the same fate. Here, I find myself in the photograph.

I look at the woman from the account and am thrown back to photographs of my mother when she was young and had a new family, and I'm thrown to sometime in the future when her reality could be my own. And I see her story play out as that of my mother's, and I'm not sad for her, because despite my mom's hardships, I am not sad for her. My mother has experienced sorrow beyond my comprehension, and I wish that she hadn't, but I'm grateful for the path she's walked because in this path I find solidarity with her. Her experience becomes grafted into my own and I find myself on her side, willing to grow strong from the beauty of her. She has earned everything, but she lives in a world which is not yet able to give it to her. She has arranged the colors on her blank page, and had some colors arranged by others unwillingly, but she has found herself on the page. The world fails to recognize the beauty of it. It would only be sad if the world were able to give it to her and refrained from doing so, or perhaps if she didn't have the resilience to understand the ways of the world.

I consider these ways for my own life and weigh my own resilience. I piece and parcel different photographs like a collage which could appear on my Instagram account someday. I wonder if maybe I were married to a white man the picture would look harder. I wonder if a young biracial woman might scroll through my account and examine it the way I've examined the woman's. I wonder if my mother's fate will be parceled into my own. Maybe if I married a Black man, understanding would dwell on the surface of the photograph. The understanding as an agreement that each photograph would mask the fear of what might happen to him, or my children given the way the world works. Is it better to marry someone who has the potential to invalidate experience in an oppressive way, or to marry someone whose body can be taken and

diminished by an oppressor? Both require resilience and unflawed understanding of the ways of the world. I'm not sure that I have this type of resilience and I'm sad because I know that other women don't consider the same things. I'm especially angry with white women who enter relationships with Black men as if a small decision were being made and there were no implications in the decision. I feel the weight of this particular decision every time I consider dating someone; such a minute but complex detail to construct my life around. I take lessons from the women who have come before me and wonder if I can navigate, and still create beauty in the depths and messiness of the ways world. I am thrown into the adulthood of the women I follow on Instagram and I crawl further underneath my blankets and worry over my being, which is the colors which I have lain out nicely and begun to put on the page. Beauty is the only thing at stake.

My headphones lie inches away from me, ready to be plugged in to give direction like a compass and I am able to peek out from the covers, as the sun, not quite ready to set passes through my blinds. I find myself on a music app, far from the purity of the photographs and people I've idealized. A song begins playing and the lyrics resound in my mind, and I am captivated by them in a different way than the way I am captivated by an image. I am captivated with substance, and with solidarity. The piano is followed rhythmically with a bass line and hand drums, and the lyrics sing over and over again in my head:

*Be leery 'bout your place in the world
You're feeling like you're chasing the world
You're leaving not a trace in the world*

But you're facing the world

I'm gonna look for my glory, yeah

I'll be back like real soon

I'm gonna look for my glory, yeah

I'll be back like real soon

I'm gonna look for my glory, yeah

I'll be back like real soon

But you know that a king is only a man

With flesh and bones, he bleeds just like you do

He said, "Where does that leave you?"

And, "Do you belong?"

I do, I do

I am content crawling out from under the covers, pushing my body to the edge of the bed, feet dangling once again. I open Instagram and look at this woman's account, and I am reminded that she is carving space for herself in the world where she was not meant to be. She is creating being, and in that she reflects glory, and in that I see my mom's glory; I see my own. I see the glory of women as they claim identities and create being, placing color on a blank page. But I see it most in Black women, navigating the space of what it is to be held down on two different fronts of oppression. I'm not upset at my mother for diminishing the way she has, but I am proud of the ways she has continued to beam, not for anyone else, but entirely for herself. She is her own before she is anyone else's and here I learn to be my own and skip somewhere between adult and child, holding the space for as long as necessary to prevent myself from diminishing. My breath is steadied, my heart beats slowly, and I am ready for the next sprint, saying over and over again, "I do, I do."

Spinning Gold and Conjuring Beauty

For a moment at the end of her video for “Sorry,” Beyoncé sits, legs folded over one another, in a bronze plated bra, hair in an updo resembling an Egyptian goddess. At the end of this moment, as she moves sharply and in direct motions, she recites:

*Me and my baby, we gon' be alright
We gon' live a good life
Big homie better grow up
Me and my whoadies 'bout to stroll up
I see them boppers in the corner
They sneaking out the back door
He only want me when I'm not there
He better call Becky with the good hair
He better call Becky with the good hair*

The video ends as Beyoncé stares into the camera, perfectly still, her repeated words still ringing in the air, shrouded in complete silence. The moment is ossified by the black and white screen, her stillness, and the glow of her makeup. It is beautiful and tragic. It became one of my favorite moments in her visual album after I'd finished seeing it for the first time in the spring of 2016.

The beauty and tragedy of the moment lie in the ways she is able to communicate something so emotionally charged with grace and power. Fans of Beyoncé think of her as indestructible. Many people, after viewing her visual album *Lemonade*—the project that includes “Sorry”—wondered, “How could anyone cheat on Beyoncé?” We cling to the moment where she states that she and her baby gon’ be all right because we know she’s rich, beautiful, and famous. We believe her legacy will never end, and as a result, we deify her. The problem with this though, is that we forget how raw the feelings attached to the last couple of lines must be, coupled with the visual power of the moment. We forget her humanity because we’ve detached her from it, and some have detached her from her Blackness. The combination of these two

things allows some white people to react to the vulnerability of the moment with memes about Becky. Memes that read, “Who’s Becky?,” “I’m Becky with the good hair,” “Somebody get Becky so I can fight her,” and in a similar, but disconnected way, pictures displaying beautiful white women with good hair and a caption of simple lemon emojis. Becky was one of the most painful moments of *Lemonade*, but she’d become something for white people to laugh at as if Beyoncé had shared an inside joke with them personally. I understand that there is nothing funny about Becky.

The moment Becky was introduced to Beyoncé’s audience, a truth became real for me that I couldn’t quite articulate, and to some degree still can’t. It was deeply personal, becoming so in the tension of beauty and tragedy in the moment. This was consistent through the visual album. *Lemonade* cast light and articulated concepts in ways that I’m not entirely sure I’m able to share or express. The album communicated the complexity of love, of an understanding of God, and the experience of Black women. Immediately after viewing the album for the first time, I tweeted about my experience. The same themes of seeing the Gospel in her album through racial and gendered redemption have continued to unfold themselves to me as I’ve seen the album over the last year, and the project has become more personal to me. The more I find myself in the project the more I feel the intensity of the criticisms towards the project, but more than that, the more I struggle with the ways white viewers consume the art. It begins and ends with Becky.

“Ultimate religious truth...can only be grasped only in symbolic form, and the Christ of the cross

is the supreme symbol of divine grace...Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit.”²

Race is an important concept to me, and an essential part of my lived experience. I talk about race a lot. With white friends, with my mother, sister, grandmother, my mother’s family, with Black friends, with strangers, in my writing, and with acquaintances from class—essentially anyone I feel safe talking about it with who and is willing to listen. I say things, and they stick to the air, and I hope the person will receive them with the grace necessary to understand and empathize with the messiness of the words. When I talk about race, I make a lot of assumptions about what the other person may or may not be thinking, what they may or may not know, and how they will or will not receive my thoughts. I talk about race because I’m trying to understand what it means to live as a person whose identity is constructed in the ways Black and white intersects. Racial reconciliation is a concept that other people toss around and strive to accomplish, but it is necessary for my lived experience.

I’ve never found difficulty in abstraction or concepts, but lived experience proves more difficult. I often have no trouble explaining ideas to friends, but have trouble finding words for the ways I feel. If I can attach the emotion to a concept like a metaphor, or an analogy, I feel more confident sharing it with others. I’ve tried to convince myself that because my lived experience with race is clouded in privilege, that I haven’t experienced the difficulty of being a

² This is quote is Reinhold Niebuhr’s appearing in James H. Cone’s book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (pg. 37).

Black woman. The question for me has always been to what degree do I understand Black experience?

The most difficult part of *Lemonade* wasn't people who were criticizing it, or people who were realizing for the first time that Beyoncé is, in fact, a Black woman. I found it difficult to watch white people consume her album and claim it as their lived experience, or to claim it as if it were just another part of Black culture made for their enjoyment. Becky as a meme was the most difficult part. Some of these white people want to be woke, so they consumed *Lemonade*, praised it for the ways it cast a spotlight on Black women, spoke about the project as an idea. But it wasn't an idea for me, it was a feeling, it was something true, and something personal. The problem was that Becky could become a meme to these good, woke, white folks, but they couldn't understand the ways their voices were crowding out the ways I'd empathized with Beyoncé and with other Black women. People want to be woke without understanding the emotions attached to the ideas of actual lived experience.

Black women have been the most understanding of my lived experience. My mother and my grandmother, both Black women, have shared their feelings and experiences with me, and I've lived in these stories hoping that the truth they present will help me to navigate my own experience. The thing that I've latched onto most is the deep complexity of my mother's and my grandmother's understandings of God. Their faith is built on beauty and tragedy as ideas and lived experience.

“Salvation is broken spirits being healed, voiceless people speaking out, and black people empowered to love their own blackness.”³

Recently a friend and I tried to discover what it is that creates and sustains Black Girl Magic. Soon after we'd asked the question, I made the connection that I'm complimented by Black girls more than any other demographic. I reopened the conversation with my friend, asking her if she'd been complimented by Black women, and I recognized the light that had illuminated her experience. We'd found connection and understanding. There is understanding in Blackness; there is community in being like someone. We decided that Black Girl Magic is completely created and sustained in the amount of times Black girls show up in each other's lives, building each other up.

For most of my life I felt locked out of my own Blackness, participating nominally in the culture without adding or taking anything from it. As a child I was often ridiculed by both Black and white people for not being Black enough. In college, I actually had Black friends and started to believe that I'd been participating in the culture all along. I realized I was attempting to box myself into the culture whiteness had made Blackness. I reject this now, anytime someone says, “x, y, and z is what it means to be Black.” When I opened myself up to my Blackness I was able

³ This is a direct quote from James H. Cone's book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (pg. 158).

to connect with Black people wholly. I believe with all sincerity that when I stopped boxing myself in I was able to understand and participate in Black Girl Magic. I needed to be able to show up in my own life before I could begin to reach out to other Black women. It took realizing that I can't appropriate a culture that I'm a part of. That's not to say that there aren't still boundaries for me, I carry an incredible amount of privilege in being partially white, but I've stopped trying to convince myself that I don't understand the experience of Black people. I've started complimenting Black girls, and noticed when they compliment me in return.

Tragedy and beauty exist alongside one another in *Lemonade*. The magic lies in the way Beyoncé is able to articulate experience for other Black women, and in the way she is able to find herself. This is what Black girls do for one another; this is how they sustain magic

Forward
Best foot first just in case
When we made our way 'til now
It's time to listen, it's time to fight
Forward
Now we're going to hold doors open for a while
Now we can be open for a while
*Forward*⁴

Recently, I was talking with a friend and an acquaintance after class about this idea of colorism, and how problematic it is in the Black community when white women date and marry

⁴ These lyrics appear in Beyoncé's song "Forward" on her album *Lemonade*.

Black men. I described the problem as if it was a symptom that could be treated and fixed, as if humans weren't wrapped up in it with legitimate feelings and emotions—as if the problem weren't much more complex. I recognize the gravity of the problem for dark skinned women, while also seeing the hurt and insult on the classmate's face as she tried to understand why she, a woke white woman, would have to refrain from dating a Black man, the clearly progressive move to make. I agree with her on one hand, that it is progressive and shouldn't be a problem, but I want her to understand the pain of Black women, particularly the pain of dark skinned women, when she doesn't fully understand the hate Black women receive from Black men.

In this conversation, I'm reminded of every time my mom has described herself as anything but beautiful, and I think this isn't just a problem millennials have invented on social media—the way woke people receive their information. I'm not sure what I should've told my classmate or other white women when they say they don't know what they're supposed to do if they like a Black guy and want to date him. It is at times painful and difficult for people of color to engage in relationships with white people. I am skeptical of the reasons white people want to date people of color. I worry that for some white women it might be a fad they will outgrow, like, “Yeah, I dated a Black guy once. My parents were so mad at me.” Perhaps in a fully white community this seems like something to just shrug off. But lived experience can't just be shrugged off.

I've started complimenting Black women, and noticed when they compliment me in return. I took stock of the kinds of compliments I receive, and noticed that they all revolve

around my hair. Almost every compliment will be, “I love your hair,” or “You have good hair. I wish I had good hair,” or “What kind of hair product do you use?” These are all genuine compliments, but there is sometimes a second side to them, especially in the comment, “I wish I had good hair like you.” After *Lemonade* I hear “good hair” and I think of its synonym: Becky. Before *Lemonade* Becky was nameless, she was just all white women with good hair, but now good hair had become synonymous with Becky, I know these women aren’t comparing me to Becky, but there is something about the comment that bites. Patterned into this comment is the belief that there is something less beautiful in Blackness, that it is more desirable to have hair that is less textured, less thick, and better able to be controlled.

I see and hear this in the comments some Black men make about white women. Some Black men describe white women as passive, better able to be dominated. They say that Black women don’t want to listen, or are too independent. What they mean by this is that Black women present too much of an ideological challenge to them. To date a Black woman who is seen as autonomous, Black men have to first understand the ways white supremacy has tried to reduce them to less than men. It is much easier to run from this. It is much easier to disengage from race and be upset with white supremacy without understanding the ways it diminishes the humanity of Black people. As a result, Black women become one of the least desired demographics in America. I feel the weight of this lived experience, and I see how it weighs on other Black women. My mother is divorced, and her mother was divorced before her. I’ve caught glimpses of the amount both women invested in their marriages and the toll it has taken to be so close to achieving something which had always seemed elusive.

In between different songs Beyoncé says, “Grandmother, the alchemist, you spun gold out of this hard life, conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not

live. Discovered the antidote in your own kit. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter who then passed it down to her daughter.” I heard these words and I thought of my own grandmother and mother. Beyoncé was seeking truth, and she’d found it in her own lineage, that of the Black women closest to her. She speaks to both the past, and to the future, the experiences of the women before her, and to her daughter. What is asked of her and needed from her as a mother is to teach her daughter to seek truth in being a Black woman, to reveal the secrets of Black Girl Magic to her daughter, so that one day her daughter can teach her daughter.

My grandmother and mother were able to do this for me. They were able to show me the ways they experienced beauty with tragedy and in this they revealed to me the ways they believe in God, and believe in their own beauty as an extension. They are teaching me about God, about myself, and about them. They are teaching me to spin gold out of this hard life, and conjure beauty from things left behind.

“This past, the Negro’s past, [...] the endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, [...] yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—[...] but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are [...] It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hate whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your children to hate, [...] I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and beauty. This country should be proud of them, too, but alas, not

many people in this country even know of their existence. And the reason for this ignorance is a knowledge of the role these people played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know.”⁵

I understand from my own experiences that many Black people want to play along with white people and act like there is no problem with race relations in America. History suggests otherwise, and this is felt in the ways Black people navigate their worlds. I thought that maybe because I have a white father it would be my job to understand the experiences of Black people and use my privilege to surrender my platform and advocate for Black people. But when I watched her visual album for the first time, and was cut by the laughs about Becky, I was reminded that I don’t just learn about Black experience second hand, I’m a participant in it.

Though I’m biracial, and racial reconciliation is necessary for my lived experience, I exist as a Black person in predominantly white spaces. I’ve learned that racial reconciliation is grounded in my being, and that it will come, but not as my burden to carry. It is a part of who I am because of my parents, but I am not alone in it when I find myself in solidarity with other Black people.

By the end of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé has reconciled herself to her husband, and she’s asked other Black women to join in solidarity with her to be empowered in a country that rejects her and other Black women. Though she is reconciling Black women to Black men and finding

⁵ This is a quote from James Baldwin appearing in James H. Cone’s book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (pg. 162).

beauty in herself, I can't help but think of the ways Black and white people are being reconciled to each other. In a song just before this call to action, she sings

*Found the truth beneath your lies
And true love never has to hide
True love never has to hide
I'll trade your broken wings for mine
Trade your broken wings for mine
I've seen your scars and kissed your crime
Seen your scars and kissed your crime*

*...
They say true love's the greatest weapon
To win the war caused by pain, pain
But every diamond has imperfections
But my love's too pure to watch it chip away
Oh nothing real can be threatened
True love breathes salvation back into me
With every tear came redemption
And my torturer became my remedy*

In these lyrics I found the meaning of redemption and reconciliation, because I was able to understand the ways God, the experiences of Black women, my life, and race were able to carve out space in fifteen short lines.

Beyoncé had given me a way of understanding, she'd spoken to my experience, and she'd made her project personal to me. When white folks laugh about Becky, the truth of this is cheapened, and so I don't take it lightly. I grip to the beauty of the project and understand that it will always be criticized and cheapened, but I also understand that it fights for an image of reconciliation. Beauty and tragedy are found in the ways I live and hope for racial reconciliation..

"No two people in America have had more violent and loving encounters than black and white

people. We were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union, and the blood of the cross of Jesus. No gulf between blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality. What God joined together, no one can tear apart.”⁶

⁶ This is a direct quote from James H. Cone’s book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (pg. 166).